


Article

Women's Circles and the Rise of the New Feminine: Reclaiming Sisterhood, Spirituality, and Wellbeing

Chia Longman 

Centre for Research on Culture and Gender, Ghent University, 9000 Ghent, Belgium; Chia.Longman@UGent.be

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Abstract: This paper draws on the results of ethnographic research on ‘women’s circles’; women-only spaces that celebrate sisterhood and the ‘feminine’, including the increasingly globally popular ‘Red Tent’. Women’s circles are non-institutionalized, often monthly gatherings, for women to come together and relax, meditate, share stories, partake in rituals, heal, nourish, and empower themselves. Based on fieldwork and in-depth interviews with founders and organizer-practitioners of women’s circles in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany, the study shows how they offer a growing number of women from diverse backgrounds a space that they find lacking in secular-liberal society, out of a desire to ‘re/connect’ with each other, their bodies, their inner selves, and sometimes with the sacred. Women’s circles are indicative of women’s heightened participation in the realm of subjective wellbeing culture, including both elements of spirituality and more secular ‘personal growth’. Against the presumption that circles would be merely expressive of neo-liberal individualist consumer culture or retrograde gender essentialism, the paper argues they can be viewed as sites of sisterhood, solidarity, and dissent, cultivating a new type of femininity grounded in both affirmative and more oppositional forms of emerging feminist consciousness. In response to the so-called ‘post-secular turn in feminism’ and the growing interest for religion and, more recently, spirituality in (secular) feminist theory, the paper pleads for a re-consideration of the rise of women’s spirituality/wellbeing culture in the West as a form of post-secular agency.

Keywords: women’s spirituality; subjective wellbeing; sisterhood; consciousness-raising; femininity; post-secular turn; postfeminism

1. Introduction

“Just as consciousness raising groups led to the Women’s Movement of the late 1960s and 70’s, I believe that it is through circles of women that the energy of the pink pussyhat marches will lead to a Global Women’s Movement. At the end of the day, I was in an ad-hoc circle that met and shared what the experience of being in the march was like. I hope that others also did so, or will do so.”

Jean Bolen ([Bolen 2017](#))

In this paper I introduce the results of an empirical study on the barely researched phenomenon of women’s circles taking place today across Western Europe—albeit in a global and transnational context. Drawing on participant observation and in-depth interviews with organizers and practitioners across Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany, I show how in women’s circles, understandings and practices of femininity and sisterhood are emerging that transcend boundaries between the religious, the spiritual, and the secular. I argue that circles exemplify a form of women’s post-secular agency and subjectivity and aim to question the feminist potential of the ‘new femininity’ that is being cultivated in contemporary women’s spirituality and wellbeing culture more generally.

Women's circles are non-institutionalized, recurrent (often monthly) gatherings of which the objective is to be among women in order to experience, celebrate, and re/connect with 'the feminine'. Sometimes also called women's temples or moon circles, they are often held around the new moon, thus affirming the symbolic connection between the lunar calendar and the female bodily cycle. Although the circle is a recurrent format within the context of therapy, and ceremonial and community gatherings (e.g., talking circles, family circles, dance circles, prayer circles, drumming circles ...) (Baldwin 2009; Cahill and Halpern 1992), the emergence of women-only circles can likely be traced back to the feminist spirituality movement of the 1970s, as they are referred to in both the writings by pioneers like Starhawk (Starhawk 1997) and sometimes appear as common features of rituals and gatherings within Goddess and Pagan movements (Trulsson 2013). Proponents of women's circles in their writings often emphasize the 'ancient' and cross-cultural character of gathering in circles as an effective form of sharing and communication, and stress the way circling particularly appeals to women, due to its 'non-hierarchical' and 'non-linear' character (Engel 2000; Faulkner 2011; Bolen 2013).

'Women's circles' is also a self-label for the monthly gatherings that are the subject of analysis in this paper. Their occurrence appears to be a growing phenomenon across the globe in recent years, as they have become more visible and accessible to a broader audience due to the Internet and the launch of various transnational 'circle movements' since the 2000s that promote circling (see Section 3). In any case, save some exceptions (Leidenfrost 2012; Neu 1995), contemporary women's circles have rarely been studied, and empirical research is lacking altogether in the European context. Most of the women's circles I encountered and participated in during my fieldwork in Belgium, Holland, and Germany were either autonomous, or loosely affiliated and inspired by transnational circle movements. They did not affiliate with, nor promote any particular feminist and/or religious movement or spiritual tradition. Furthermore, although the circles share certain features that in scholarly literature and daily parlance are often considered 'spiritual' (such as meditation, bodywork, ritual, chanting, presence of altars, oracle cards, blessings, and sometimes references to the divine or sacred feminine or goddesses), in my interviewees' self-descriptions, spirituality was often seen as a personal issue and not a pre-requisite of the circle ethos and experience.

Due to lack of scholarly consensus on what constitutes 'spirituality', in the first place I use the term in order to make a distinction with established religions, in referral to the historical conjecture that is particularly characteristic of West-European society in which many people no longer identify as 'religious', but do in increasing numbers self-identify as 'spiritual' and/or are engaged in 'spiritualities of the self', 'holistic spiritualities', and/or 'Mind Body Spirit' (MBS) practices that also might be considered therapeutic, leisurely, etc. (Houtman and Aupers 2007; Heelas 2008; Lee 2007). Next to spirituality, I employ the term 'subjective wellbeing culture' as introduced by sociologist Paul Heelas (2008) in order to be inclusive of what is often referred to as the more secular (non-religious, worldly, or immanent) character of some of the circles I studied. The analytical concept of the 'post-secular' also fits well, seeing as it describes the paradoxical present-day condition in which currents of on-going secularization and religious revival, of disenchantment and re-enchantment, seem to co-exist. Post-secular theory also attends to the way categories such as 'religion', the 'spiritual', and the 'secular' only exist in relation to one another and are therefore deeply entangled (Nynas et al. 2015; Braidotti et al. 2014). A feminist perspective adds to this an emphasis on the gendered nature of the modern secular narrative, and its binaries that have hierarchically relegated the religious to the realm of the feminine, including the private, the emotional, the irrational, the bodily ... as opposed to the so-called masculine secular realm of rationality, reason, mind, transcendence, and its familiar Enlightenment ideals of self-realization, freedom, and autonomy (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008; Graham 2012; Aune et al. 2008). Women's circles and the increasing popularity of spiritual and subjective well-being practices among women are indicative of this post-secular trend in the West, I will argue, in that they are responding to the perceived failure of (neo-) liberal gender ideology to empower women and transform society within secular modernity.

The paper proceeds with a discussion of the relevant recent literature on women, religion, spirituality, wellbeing, and agency (Section 2). In the main part of the article, I analyse the empirical data by first describing a women's circle's main features (Section 3.1). This is followed by an analysis of the way my interviewees deploy the concept of femininity as a ground for women's personal empowerment (Section 3.2). Then, I turn to the notion of sisterhood, which is enjoying a renaissance in women's wellbeing culture, and is similarly often referred to as the essence of circle gatherings: to connect and unite women (Section 3.3). I question how the concept as used by my interviewees compares to earlier understandings of sisterhood and women's solidarity such as in feminist conscious raising groups. Finally, by way of conclusion, I question whether the personal is also political (Section 4). I suggest that the reclaiming of sisterhood and the rise of the feminine that is being propagated and explored within women's circles, and women's spirituality/wellbeing culture more generally, contains political potential beyond the level of mere personal empowerment.

2. Spirituality, Wellbeing, and Agency

What has been dubbed 'the post-secular turn in feminism' (Braidotti 2008) indicates the emerging interest within a dominant secularist strand of feminist theory for uncovering modalities of agency and subjectivity in the lives of 'non-secular' women in a variety of contexts, locations, and traditions (Vasilaki 2016). For many secular feminists, until recently, religion was seen as an impediment to women's liberation. Hence, the long-standing 'disconnection' between religious and secular feminist perspectives across the disciplines that is grounded in the historically awkward relationship between feminism and religion in Western modernity (Aune 2011; Bracke 2008; Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska 2013; Longman 2008; Reilly 2011). Yet, today, the assumption that religion would simply always be oppressive to women, and the axiom that secularization accompanies gender equality and sexual liberty, are increasingly being called into question (Butler 2008; Scott 2009). The past two decades have seen a sudden expansion in social research on the impact of 'lived religion' for women's rights and empowerment. This has been accompanied by further debate on the notion of agency that has been de-linked from the 'logics of subversion and resistance', often in relation to what from the secular-liberal point of view can be identified as more gender-traditional, conservative, non-oppositional religious piety and practice, including, for example, compliance and docility (Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016; Mahmood 2005; Burke 2012).

Qualitative research addressing the question of women's status and empowerment outside of gender-traditional institutionalized religions, such as in the field of spirituality, by contrast, has been somewhat disengaged from these broader debates on gender, agency, and religion. Nevertheless, a literature review of empirical research on women's spirituality in the West shows how longer established counter-cultural and new religious movements and spiritualities such as Wicca, Goddess spirituality, Neo-paganism, and New Age might offer women empowerment lacking in more traditional, patriarchal, and institutionalized religious traditions (Crowley 2011; Eller 1995; Puttick 1997; Rountree 2004; Salomonsen 2002; Fedele 2012; Sointu and Woodhead 2008). In their literature review in *Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality*, Fedele and Knibbe (2013) show how such oppositional movements might promote gender equality; hold a more positive view towards the female body; and engage in validations of 'feminine' values related to practices of healing, care and female solidarity. At the same time, the authors stress that, in practice, such projects might not always lead to their envisioned change and overturning of gender hierarchies. Reiterating the growing consensus within the larger field of religion and gender research today, whether it concerns institutionalized, 'lived', or 'vernacular' religion and spirituality, Fedele and Knibbe claim: '... gender (and power) relations are complex, entangled with their social context and cannot be reduced to a dualistic model of female dominating or female empowering.' (Fedele and Knibbe 2013, p. 5).

While women's involvement in new religious and spiritual movements appears to respond to gender inequalities in the traditional religions of the West, firstly, and as noted above, I consider the recent circle movements and 'autonomous' women's circles in this study as a separate phenomenon

from these longer-standing movements, communities, and traditions. Secondly, they appear more ‘post-secular’ in their orientation, and as I also suggested, can be aligned with the much broader realm of women’s agency within subjective wellbeing culture. However, this complicates a literature review, precisely because of the fuzziness of boundaries between religion/spirituality and the more ‘secular’ realm of wellness, self-help, therapy culture, and personal growth. Some sociologists of religion have attributed women’s growing interest for MBS practices and the ‘holistic milieu’ to a quest for ‘expressive selfhood’ seeing the persistence of the gendered division of labour in modern society (Sointu and Woodhead 2008). Equally important for the discussion on women’s agency is the fact that many other social and cultural theorists hold a far more critical view of the wellbeing sphere and self-help culture’s tendency to reproduce normative femininities and what it sees as its complicity with a postfeminist version of the neo-liberal self (Salmenniemi and Adamson 2015; Hochschild 1994; Kenny and Bell 2014; Blackman 2004).

These differing views on spirituality/wellbeing for women as either agentic or oppressive mirror conflicting paradigms in the wider literature on contemporary spirituality and wellbeing in the West. More positive appraisals have attributed their emergence to a ‘subjective turn’, eclipsing traditional religion towards an immanent, reflexive, and expressive selfhood and personal empowerment in a post-traditional society (Heelas et al. 2005; Houtman and Aupers 2007). These stand in contrast to more critical takes on the rise of the spiritual marketplace which is seen to represent ‘secular consumer culture’ (Lau 2000; Carrette and King 2005). Moreover, there is a whole body of Foucauldian-inspired critical literature on the broader sphere of wellbeing, including the realms of popular psychology, self-help, therapy, life-coaching, and personal growth that view these ‘technologies of the self’ as the product of a form of neo-liberal and secular governmentality that forecloses political critique and social change (Rose 1998; Wood 2007). Critics of therapy culture (Illouz 2008; Furedi 2004) and more recently the ‘wellness-industry’ similarly critique the way the new moral imperative towards body and/or mind is directed at the cultivation and management of the happier, healthier, entrepreneurial, and even ‘narcissist’ self, ‘where individual responsibility and self-expression are morphed with the mindset of a free-market economist’ (Cederström and Spicer 2015, p. 4), and are hence suited to, rather than disruptive of, the demands of neo-liberalism and late-capitalism.

These debates in social theory on the role of self, subjectivity, and power are obviously relevant from a feminist and gendered perspective. Do spaces such as women’s circles offer alternative experiences of self, body, and spirituality that challenge dominant representations of the female—commodified and sexualized—body? Or, conversely, are these ‘new’ femininities perhaps more expressive of a postfeminist neo-liberal governmentality of consumer culture in which individuals are falsely construed as self-interested economic actors with agency and control over their lives? (Gill and Scharff 2013; Phipps 2014) Although the ‘rise of the feminine’ market is booming and highly diverse, I certainly join some of these concerns, while aspects from women’s spirituality/wellbeing are by no means immune to being incorporated into postfeminist discourse (Berila et al. 2016). However, from a feminist anthropological perspective, I also concur with Fedele and Knibbe’s call to move beyond dichotomies of ‘reproducing the claims of empowerment and gender-equality of spiritual practitioners or ignoring them to “unmask” spirituality as a form of false consciousness’ (Fedele and Knibbe 2013, p. 15). Hence, in this article, while taking the claims of my interlocutors seriously, I similarly set out to explore how the femininities that are cultivated within women’s circles can be critically analysed and assessed.

3. When Women Gather: Analysing the Circle Phenomenon

In order to gain insight into the diversity of the phenomenon of women’s circles today, in my study I included both spontaneously grown ‘self-directed’ circles without any affiliation or leadership, next to more open circles on offer on a regular basis and hosted by women who were active as life coaches, or involved in other wellbeing or spiritual practices, such as ritual work, yoga, workshops, retreats, and festivals. Some of the circles were affiliated with or inspired by transnational women’s

circle movements, which were often launched in North America, such as the *Red Tent Temple movement*, *Gather the Women*, and *Awakening Women*.¹

The fieldwork for this study was conducted intermittently between mid 2014 and the spring of 2017.² I participated in 20 women's circles in different regions of Belgium, The Netherlands, and in the city of Berlin, Germany. I located the circles by participating in women's festivals in Belgium, and later the Netherlands, whose organizers were also involved in circling, agreed to participate in my study, and gave me permission to distribute flyers asking for potential interviewees to contact me. I also conducted internet searches in all three countries that led me to websites that advertised open circles whose organizers I approached requesting either circle participation and/or an interview. I carried out in-depth interviews with 38 women who lead, host, or participate regularly in women's circles. The women I interviewed their ages ranged from 25 to 60. The majority is white and had been born, raised, and was living in Belgium, the Netherlands, or Germany, although a minority had mixed or minority racial/ethnic and/or migrant backgrounds within and from outside of Europe (particularly those in urban contexts), and some had or were travelling extensively. The women I encountered involved in circling were cis women; at least in my limited sample, I did not encounter anyone who identified as transgender, non-binary, or (gender) queer. From my interviews it emerged that the majority was heterosexual, with a minority of lesbian and sexuality-questioning women. Some were single and childless; others were married or had partners and children (either biological, adopted, or with step-children in new family arrangements). Many had enjoyed a Christian upbringing (Catholic or Protestant), but were secular and/or no longer practicing. A minority was from an Orthodox-Christian, Evangelical, or Islamic background. Some had become interested and were actively engaged in various new spiritualities (e.g., shamanism, tantrism, Reiki, Goddess spirituality) at some point in their lives, whereas for others spirituality was less relevant or limited to, e.g., reading particular authors in the field of spirituality or personal development, or popular publications on women's history, health, psychology, management, etc. As a white, professional, secular, cis gender, heterosexual mother in her early forties, I shared many personal characteristics with my interviewees and circle participants, by whom I was welcomed and never questioned in terms of my motivations, appearance, or identity.

As far as education level was concerned, most women had enjoyed higher education (university or college), although a minority had only finished high school. Socio-economic class was similarly diverse, ranging from middle class to more modest living levels. A minority was self-employed and professionally active as a coach or therapist in the wellbeing sector (either solely or next to other employment such as teaching, training, journalism, arts, management); some were homemakers with breadwinning partners, others unemployed and dependent on state support. Circle participation in closed circles did not involve any financial exchange. Open circles might request participants to bring some food or snacks to share. Others involved either a voluntary contribution or a fixed price ranging between 10 and, in my experience, at most, 50 Euros per circle, which might serve to cover costs or as an income source for the organizers.

¹ Organizations that promote women's circles have their own distinct characteristics. Red Tent circles or temples are inspired by Anita Diamant's novel *The Red Tent* (Diamant 1997) that tells a fictional account of biblical society from a woman's perspective. The writer accords a central role to a tent in which women must take refuge while menstruating or giving birth, yet is characterized as a space in which they find mutual support and encouragement from their female kin. The idea of the red tent as a monthly gathering for women was initiated in the US by Alisa Starkweather around 2005, and participant-scholar Isadora Gabrielle Leidenfrost (2012) later wrote a doctoral thesis, which was accompanied by a documentary of the same name *Things We Don't Talk About: Women's Stories from the Red Tent*. Red Tents, both related to and independent of the Red Tent temple movement, have been sprouting up across continents over the past decade (See: <http://redtenttemplemovement.com>). Gather The Women similarly originated in the early 2000s, works together with partner organizations and local co-ordinators (including the countries in this study); holds congresses; and promotes circling (<http://www.gatherthewomen.org>). Awakening Women was founded by 'yogini' Chameli Ardagh (Montelius and Ardagh n.d.) and offers retreats, training, and promotes 'women's temple groups' and has published a Sisterhood Manifesto (<https://awakeningwomen.com>).

² Excerpts from the interviews in Dutch or German have been translated into English. In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, I use pseudonyms.

3.1. Holding Sacred Space

Circles take place on an evening or weekend (often around the new moon), and sometimes during a weekday, and usually last about 2.5 h. The circles I visited there were between 6 to 12 women present, but there are certainly both smaller and larger ones. They often take place in a woman's home: from her personal living room, spare room, or workspace, converted into a 'temple' for the occasion, to an elaborately decorated attic or garden barn. Some open circles take place in a rented space, otherwise used for activities such as workshops, dance, or yoga, and some circles even take place in the open air. Cushions are placed in a circle where participants are to be seated, often around some kind of centrepiece or altar in the middle and/or elsewhere in the room. There might be the smell of delicate incense, herbal tea brewing, and the sound of soft music playing. Small statues (such as female figurines or goddesses), candles, stones, fresh flowers, drapes, and shawls might decorate the room, further contributing to a warm, calm, welcoming, 'sacred' space aesthetic and feel.

One of the first women's circles I visited was a 'Red Tent' that Margot had been organizing for some years now, next to her other activities such as performing 'contemporary' rituals and ceremonies at weddings, birth celebrations, and funerals. Margot advertises her open 'non-spiritual' circles on her website and in an email-newsletter, and had announced this particular midsummer circle for 'finding inspiration and recognition' among women guided by the topic of 'highpoints', 'of a day, year, in one's life and in enjoyment, love, and in anger . . . '. After a 90-min drive into the countryside I arrived at the quaint cottage that Margot and her husband rent out as a holiday home and for festive occasions. She welcomed me upon entering the building where I met five other women who were chatting around a small bar table upon which everyone had placed the snacks they had brought along. After some small talk Margot invited us to enter one by one into the adjacent room where the circle was to take place. When it was my turn, I passed through a curtain and Margot performed a short blessing while spraying some incense over and around me, asking me to 'come to myself, to take a deep breath and let go'. At many circles—either upon entering or during the circle—I similarly encountered this practice of 'smudging', an ancient ritual practice of cleansing and purifying. This might be performed by the host herself or by passing around incense or a bowl of burning herbs (like sage), the smoke of which participants fan towards themselves with a brush of feathers or their hands. I entered the circle and sat down on one of the free cushions in a room decorated with red fabric and curtains (as is typical for Red Tent meetings). The atmosphere was quiet and relaxed as participants got comfortable and one could sense a 'slowing down' of pace.

Like many other circles I visited, the Red Tent gathering started with some welcoming words by the host, and a round of self-introduction and/or statement of one's intentions for being present. Margot explained how the Red Tent was an ancient phenomenon of women coming together and claimed that although 'nothing special' really takes place, it gives women renewed energy as it offers a form of support for women to be able to cope better with daily life in a 'man's world'. Circles might continue with the host telling about her own intention or an experience, a story, a poem, or, as was the case for this Red Tent, the announcement of a particular theme to be discussed or reflected upon. This can include more typical 'women's topics' like birth, menstruation, sexuality, mother or sister relationships, to more general or abstract themes like 'making yourself visible', vulnerability, shame, thankfulness, letting go, the 'power of the heart', the season of the year Margot asked us to each introduce ourselves and state what for each of us was a 'highpoint' in our lives. After this first round of sharing stories she invited us to close our eyes and participate in a guided meditation. Many circles include these moments, which are referred to as 'grounding', or re/connecting with your bodily self and the earth, through mediation or visualization.

The rest of the evening continued quite spontaneously with conversations and sharing personal stories on topics such as how to actualize yourself, how to make time and space for yourselves within relationships and family life, etc. We were made to feel free to even lie down, and go in and out to fetch some snacks and tea. Sometimes, in circles, stories or popular literature that circulates in women's wellbeing culture might be shared or discussed (Estés 1995). Either the host takes the initiative, or

participants are invited to 'bring in' a personal story, poem, or perhaps a song. Yet, women's circles do not exclusively revolve around talking. There might be craftwork (guided by a theme, ritual, or mediation), dancing, singing, chanting, and some drumming might take place, as well as touching and massaging.

From the more closed, spontaneously emerged circles, to the more identifiable open circles such as the Red Tent circles, there are certain minimal features that apply and give the circles their distinctive character. Firstly, almost every circle I visited made use of a talking stick with the purpose of speaking and being heard without interruption. The idea is that anyone present should be able to 'bring in', that is, share and express what they want in the circle—by passing on or by taking the talking stick if there is an urge—and to either speak or remain silent without any pressure. Another rule is that what is told in the circle must stay in the circle; the circle is very much emphasized as a 'safe space' where women can fully express what they want or feel the need to share, either verbally or emotionally. As was emphasized by all interviewees, another important feature of women's circles is to refrain from giving advice or judgment after one speaks, sometimes referred to as 'holding space' for another, as one interviewee claimed: 'staying close to yourself, by taking your responsibility and behaving with integrity with any information shared'. The circle is seen as an essentially egalitarian space, where there is respect for the opinion, expression, experience, wisdom, and knowledge of all, regardless of age, education, or background. A final important remark is that, except for some of the closed circles that might have started out among a number of acquaintances, most often—and certainly open circles—circles are usually not held among friends. More often than not, women who attend are complete strangers to each other and many do not interact with each other outside of their circle 'bond'.

3.2. *The New Feminine?*

Circles are not spaces where something has to be done, achieved, or performed, but places for connecting and for purely 'being' in the here and now. They might also be described and experienced as moments of rest and relaxation, of simply breathing and slowing down seeing what many interviewees perceived as the hectic, high-pressured, and exhausting lives of many women today. In the circle, it was claimed, you can 'be yourself', and 'let down masks'; 'you don't have to impress and compete with others', but can simply be 'seen, acknowledged, nourished and loved'. A substantial number of my interviewees who became involved in wellbeing culture had been professionally active in demanding and/or competitive careers. Some had suffered burnouts and opted out of their former jobs; others had become increasingly frustrated or disillusioned with the neo-liberal ethos in the workplace that stresses competitiveness, shallowness, individualism, rationality, profit, and gain. Interviewees often associated such traits with 'masculinity'. For example, Xenia, a mother, self-employed trainer, and festival and circle organizer in her mid-forties, claimed that she had a 'well-developed masculine side', but during a successful business career, felt something had been missing. She desired to explore her own femininity, and then later how she could 'bring more of this femininity into the world' by helping other women do so in their own personal and professional lives.

From an analytical perspective, despite its centrality in the social constructionist approach to gender, the concept of 'femininity' remains somewhat under-theorized (Gill and Scharff 2013, p. 2). Generally, second-wave feminists saw constructions of femininity as the grounds for women's oppression. Females were socialized into feminine behaviour and values 'associated with passivity, submissiveness and dependency', and the rejection of feminine identities was therefore perceived as 'crucial in producing a feminist identity and consciousness' (Hollows 2000, p. 10). For women to achieve the autonomy, individuality, and subjectivity that has historically only been accorded to men, female empowerment sits uneasily with dominant constructions of femininity that have positioned women as 'other', 'as 'irrational, over-sensitive, destined to be wife and mother', and associated with 'the body, sex, and sin' (Braidotti 1994, p. 235). While this rather negative view of femininity has remained dominant in feminist activism and thought, more positive and affirmative approaches

characterize strands of second-wave radical and cultural feminism and, more recently, what has been referred to as postfeminism.

Yet, radical and cultural feminist thought is often portrayed as having re-inscribed stereotypical femininity by simply reversing the values traditionally accorded to gender differences. It has been accused of 'biological essentialism' by positing the idea of a 'unique female nature', and it is often viewed as exclusionary in its disregard for racial, ethnic, and class differences (Alcoff 1988; Budgeon 2011; Rudy 2001). Over the past decade, femininity has regained some renewed attention, particularly in feminist analyses of popular culture in a society which has been referred to as marked by a 'postfeminist sensibility'. This research often focuses on the representation of (usually white-middle class) women in popular literature, media, beauty, and body politics, emphasizing the way global consumer capitalism and neoliberalism has incited the emergence of 'empowered' female subjectivities as 'entrepreneurs of the self'. According to Elias, Gill, and Scharff (Elias et al. 2017, p. 25), although these 'new femininities' might have displaced earlier constructions of femininity highlighting women's mothering and caring roles, and they might offer women today more individual agency, freedom, and pleasure, they are also disciplinary in their emphasis on consumerism and self-labouring, and often reproduce dominant forms of (hetero-)sexual attractiveness. While gender analysis today stresses both the regulative and potentially empowering material, discursive and (psycho-)social processes by which gendered subjects, such as 'women', come into being, as Ulrike Dahl (Dahl 2017, p. 36) remarks in her recent work on queer femininity, to date, 'feminist theory still has trouble with the question of femininity'.

My interviewees saw the circle as a space where women can experience some kind of re/connection with their own 'femininity', through connecting to their self, their body, the earth, and the sacred, as a healing and potential empowering force. I asked Angelique, a life coach in her late twenties, to describe to me what happens in a women's circle in which participants are invited to make this connection:

I'll tell you what a women's circle is not; it is not a discussion group. We don't come together to complain about how difficult it is for us women and so on. The core is very much about being in the now, in the moment and making a connection with your body and start feeling now what is going on inside of you. So what do you feel, what are you experiencing, what thoughts arise? Because the stories, they really do not matter so much. So awareness of your body, to be connected to your body is much more important. We always do an exercise, and it's more about doing, experiencing. And always meditation, so more experiencing, less Talking does happen of course; that's what we start with in a circle But it's not a talking group. It's about experiencing and becoming conscious, am I thinking too much, am I in my head or in my body? Am I connected to my core? How is my charisma, and my energy, my femininity? It's a sort of discovery path to different aspects.

Most of the circles I took part in included guided meditation sessions in which participants were invited to focus on and connect with their belly, womb, or pelvic region. This 'grounding' is seen as a way to 'descend' into your body and thereby connect to feminine power or energy, which was sometimes opposed to the more cerebral realm of thinking associated with masculinity. 'You are a priestess, you are a goddess' was pronounced by a host during a circle mediation session I participated in, as a technique to instil an identification, or better put, more of an affective connection, with 'the feminine' within. Although such acts and discourses within circles that promote a 'return to the female body' might seem reminiscent of a re-evaluation of 'female biology' and 'female energy' as a source of women's identity as proposed in earlier cultural feminist theory (Alcoff 1988), I find there is shift away from binary and biological essentialist paradigms that is deemed so problematic in contemporary gender theory and feminist thought.

So when I probed my interviewees to unpack their understandings of gender, and in particular what they exactly meant by one's 'femininity', this was not in a simplistic manner reduced to essential

biological differences, such as being located in reproductive organs, hormones, or the 'female brain'. The trope of female embodiment was far more pronounced in a more abstract and open sense at the experiential, ritual and symbolic level. I experienced how circle leaders also very consciously expressed a sense of diversity by using inclusive language. Even those, for example, without breasts or wombs, were seen as full participants and able to 'connect' with their femininity. Those with, or without children, either out of choice or involuntarily, and as I experienced first-hand at one occasion, a woman with a physical disability, were embraced. Although for the majority the question of men asking to join, or the issue of transgender inclusion had not (yet) arisen, some claimed to be open to transwomen and/or genderqueers. However, my interviewees were adamant on the necessity for 'women's space' as a form of temporary and voluntary, yet not forced or legal, gender separatism.

When I questioned why men could not participate, this led to responses with more pragmatic than principled arguments, such as that many women would not feel comfortable with men present talking about more sensitive issues related to the body and sexuality. Others referred to the change in women's behaviour when a man enters the room, such as the heterosexual tensions and gendered behaviour that might arise in mixed settings, or have some kind of effect on group dynamics. The need for women's only space was based on the circle organizers' own experiences, with the difference not being so easy to explain. In women's circles, physical contact like hugging, touching, and massaging also might take place. These forms of homosociality and intimacy between strangers are often new to many women who first come to circles and can be experienced as very fulfilling. This was referred to by Grace, a coach, circle, and 'feminine divine' retreat leader and world traveller in her mid-twenties, in explaining the necessity for women-only space:

... I've never had a man come to a women's circle, but I went to a circle or a workshop where there's men and women in the circle once. And there's never the same level I feel of this mystical, magical energy that happens when women come together. Safety, security, openness, trust. Even touch, when we do practices with touch, a lot of times we think of touch as having a sexual ... we think of touch as sexual. And often, women experience touch ... and for men, it's very much taking something. ... And a feminine touch is very nourishing. It's giving. It's not taking, it's fully just giving love, giving energy.

Hence, the corporeal, sensorial, the haptic, the affective, the visceral, and the trope of feminine embodiment, rather than female biology, are central to women's circles. I also asked Red Tent organizer Sarah to explain to me what the often-returning notion of 'stepping into your feminine power' meant, and how it was achieved by circle participation:

Standing in my feminine power means going beyond my comfort zone ... And that you really go for your desires and your dreams, without going over your limits. That is also new. And for me that also goes with feminine power. It's a different way of leadership than a kind of dominance. (...) So, I'll try to explain it, say we are in a conversation or something and by descending into my pelvis, for example, (...) it's a kind of feeling of being there and listening, and not just with my ears, but at other levels. (...) So, if I open myself to the signals, when you are also bringing something in. (...) Someone takes her full responsibility to say that and then we, for example, take that further. And then someone else feels something coming up and takes the responsibility to express that and bring it into the circle and something very different develops. That's cause and effect, leading and following. (...) Those circles where the most happens is when it really works for others to come into their power. And that is coming into your power, daring to bring your opinion, your voice, your idea, your intuitive idea into the circle. That is power. That is my power ... Look, I start to sit up straight while saying this! That is really what I mean by this. That my idea is important enough to bring in ...

Victoria had recently started organizing women's workshops and circles, as she felt that she had been missing the 'softness of the feminine' and wanted to bring this into her life somehow. When I

asked if she could elaborate more on what she meant by femininity, she thought it was not so easy to explain:

... It has to do with a kind of soft mildness and having, or steering, or doing or not doing things to emerge from that soft mildness. Instead of wanting and achieving. And finding your purpose there. (...) For a long time I was involved in 'there'. And it seems that when you step into that female power, then the goal seems more diffuse, because ... it is much less sharply circumscribed and determined. (...) I have to physically illustrate this (points a far) ... A man goes 'there' and wants to be there and there, and then there are certain steps to take, while the feminine energy or feminine power, I think, is about a certain consciousness of a certain energy field. And then in that, taking things along. Taking the things with you in a kind of a dance towards a goal. ... That is different. And to my great amazement I notice that it suits me, but that is new, even to me. And that is really nice, that is much softer, that is working less hard. It doesn't go against my nature but it goes with my nature. I am really good at it apparently, while I don't even know where I learned it all. (...) Is that feminine? I don't know. (...) For the time being for me, it is.

Thus, at first sight, the desire for women-only space and the reclaiming of the feminine might seem reminiscent of certain cultural or radical feminist principles that are largely seen as retrograde today. There are resonances with radical feminism, such as the need for women-only separatism, and there are also resonances with cultural feminist thought. Female connectedness is valued in the circle; and relationships within the circle bond are women-centred. Yet, a complete women-centred culture is rejected, as women's circles do not provide nor promote a complete counter-culture based on an identity politics for women. Women's circles also eschew complete biological or cultural essentialism, are not 'anti-men', and reject the idea of female superiority (Daly 1990; Rudy 2001; Alcoff 1988). In the spirit of the spiritual marketplace, they are temporary and voluntary spaces, where through self-care, women can replenish, regroup, re/connect, and become empowered when they return to their daily private and public lives.

Opposed to theorizations of women's agency that focus on modes of resistance or complicity in gender-traditional religions, I suggest that in women's circles in a more nomadic, affective, and affirmative sense, agency emerges through a re-valuation of femininity that involves a more open-ended explorative, imaginative, and experiential process with regards to gender identity and sexual difference (Braidotti 2011; Cornell and Seely 2016). Interviewees defined femininity by referring to more conventional feminine attributes such as 'softness' and 'gentleness', but they also defined femininity in very broad and sometimes more 'abstract' ways, stating it could mean many things like a 'large palette' of understandings and experiences, from 'experiencing through the senses', to 'going inwards', 'receptivity', 'flowing instead of achieving', and 'organically connecting'. Women's circles seem to appeal to a variety of women, both those who had lived in more 'traditional' feminine roles, due to either their generation, personal, cultural, class or religious upbringing, and those who had walked the modern gender liberal (or postfeminist) route towards 'having it all' (autonomy, achievement and/or personal fulfilment and professional success). 'I do not know what it means to be a woman', pronounced a married stay-at-home mother with grown children at a circle I participated, when stating her intentions for being present. Despite having fulfilled traditional gender role expectations, 'femininity' was something she sincerely thought she had never encountered and somehow desired to re/gain.

The femininities that are propagated and cultivated in women's circles, I find, similarly do not fully comply with what has been referred to as the 'new femininities' in a postfeminist era. Despite the ethic of self-transformation that characterizes the constitution of contemporary subjectivities within neoliberal societies, whether it applies to therapeutic self-help culture or disciplinary wellbeing and beauty regimes, women's circles divert in substantial ways. Women's beauty ideals are more critiqued than celebrated in stories shared in women's circles, as are neo-liberal narratives of individual self-responsibility towards developing more self-esteem, confidence, and success (Elias et al. 2017).

Furthermore, women's circles not only offer a space for women to explore and craft their femininity through making 'self' connections that emerge through spiritual/wellbeing embodied practices, but also by making 'other' connections through sharing stories, rituals, emotions, and touch. Hence, the question can be posed whether the femininities propagated and practiced in women's circles might move beyond mere self-empowerment and individual agency, and possibly link-up with a feminist critique of society towards broader ethical and political change. In the next section, I engage further with the critique that has often been voiced against spiritual and wellbeing culture in that it would reflect a neo-liberal 'secular' governmentality merely holding the individual accountable for cultivating a happier empowered self. I turn to the notion of sisterhood that, conversely, I argue, captures a sense of collective agency and community and that goes beyond the level of the lone individual. For women's empowerment is not only seen as a personal issue, but as emerging in and from a connectedness and solidarity between them.

3.3. Sisterhood Reclaimed

According to organizers and practitioners, the circle was not only perceived as a space for personal empowerment through re/connecting with one's feminine self, but also somewhere for women to connect with each other in a more deep and meaningful way. The tradition of women 'gathering' was lost in today's society, many found, and they were convinced there was a yearning among women for spaces where they simply share each other's company. According to Naomi, a Red Tent organizer:

This moment, once a month (...) of women being together, and indeed, without any judgments, without all those advices, of just being able to be together. And the sisterhood, that is the connection that is so important in the Red Tent, that women can feel it. The positive force that connects women instead of that which we are also unfortunately familiar with The negative part. You know, the gossiping at work, or you know, friend groups, or There is nothing of all of that in the Red Tent

Phaedra organized what she advertised as 'sisterhood circles' where I became a regular participant over a two-year period. She did not affiliate herself with any other organization, and had mostly been interested in shamanism since her twenties. Yet at a certain point she had felt the need to be among women herself, due to a lack of deep friendships with women in her youth. I asked her what the circle experience meant for her:

... To me it feels like the way you as women ... and it's called sisterhood, because for me it really feels like we are all sisters. We are all different and that I find really important to bring back into this world and society. (...) I have really experienced a lot of things how women can treat each other, really hurtful things. (...) I was really lonely. That healed over the years, because I chose it very consciously. Then I learned what it means to have female friends and to really get into true sisterhood. (...) And that's something I think a lot of women miss. Something that is a deep absence, of women among each other and in connection to men Just to be whole.

The concept of sisterhood emerged often in my interviews, and is enjoying a complete renaissance within the sphere of women's spirituality and subjective well-being culture in recent years, as is attested by my fieldwork, the increase of popular publications, blogs, and coaching initiatives to be found online. In feminist theory today, by contrast, the concept of sisterhood is generally seen as historically important—'sisterhood is powerful'—yet now a discredited term. The notion of (global) sisterhood continues to be held accountable for its white middle-class pretensions, favouring new forms of solidarity including multiracial, intersectional, and transnational feminism, and coalitions that move beyond the potential exclusions of difference and identity based politics (Mohanty 2003; Yuval-Davis 2011; Carby 1996).

Most interviewees were unfamiliar with this particular genealogy of the concept of sisterhood. As the interview excerpts show, and a first analysis might suggest, the term is not used in an overtly

political sense. Rather, it is seen as a reclaiming of solidarity between women at the personal level, and in the spiritual sense of bonding and deep connectedness, opposed to what was referred to as the unnecessary ‘competition’, ‘jealously’, and ‘distrust’ between many women today. Feminist scholar bell Hooks (1986) also addresses the problematic relationship between women in her classic essay on sisterhood and political solidarity from the eighties. She attributes the failure of women to bond more, to a sexist society in which they have been socialized into ‘male supremacist values’ of suspicious, defensive, and competitive behaviour, which leads women ‘to feel threatened by another without cause’ (Hooks 1986, p. 129). Rather than abandon the term due to its ‘bourgeois white feminist’ co-optation, however, she pleads for reclaiming solidarity by rejecting the idea of ‘shared victimization’. Instead, hooks argues, differences between women should be confronted, and bonding should be based on a ‘political commitment to a feminist movement that ends sexist oppression’ while ‘female consciousness’ must be transformed.

My interviewees’ understandings and practices of ‘sisterhood’ in women’s circles both resonate with and divert from hook’s views in several ways. Firstly, addressing ‘diversity among women’ did not appear a main concern to my interviewees, although they claimed to be open and welcoming to women of all ages, classes, sexual identities, ethnicities, and backgrounds. As attested by the profile of my research population and in some descriptions of the circle setting and its egalitarian ethos, both circle leaders and participants also show to reflect far more diversity than is simply captured by the notion of ‘white middle class’. Furthermore, the majority of my informants did not identify as feminists to start with. Also, if they did, they did not so much see their own work or circling as a ‘feminist’ practice, nor align themselves with what they perceived was the feminist movement. Most were grateful with what the women’s movement had achieved and fully subscribed to equal rights between women and men. Some thought the feminist label had too many pejorative connotations and linked it to ‘anti-men’. Others expressed they had personally just not been that attracted to what they perceived to be a style of political struggle and public activism, like ‘standing on the barricades’. At the same time, as mentioned above, many interviewees were highly critical of what they saw as a patriarchal, sexist, and unjust world. Some were highly critical of dominant and superficial representations of femininity and female beauty and the sexualisation of women’s bodies within visual culture, the media, and education (Gill and Donaghue 2013). Many were also deeply concerned with social justice issues pertaining to, e.g., education, health, climate warming, environmental exploitation and pollution, and the rise of right wing politics and populism.

Those that brought up the phenomenon of women’s conscious-raising groups during the second wave claimed today’s circles were something different, starting with the idea that it was not about ‘complaining about men’ or taking the ‘victim’ position. For example, Eva is a former midwife in her mid-fifties who had been organizing women’s courses, coaching, and circles for 15 years:

I do think that feminism brought us something ... But I think that we still have a really long way to go and that women are only just waking up a little and that they sometimes also really find it hard. Because to a certain extent those women’s circles work, but what comes up every time is that ... There are always a few women who will say ‘this is the first time I am doing this’, but the reason they never did it before is because they never trusted women and this is the first time they say and feel something in a circle like this. So there is little loyalty and trust among each other. The competition ... but I can feel it, that it is gradually decreasing ...

Despite the distancing from the feminist label, then again, such descriptions do seem to resonate strongly with bell hooks’ view of the necessity of sisterhood and female consciousness-raising in order to tackle some of the problematic relations between women in a patriarchal society. The quote also shows striking parallels with earlier accounts of consciousness-raising, including the method of personal-testimony in women-only spaces, encouraging them to speak their thoughts. Although I hesitate to characterize women’s circles as sites of ‘struggle’, where in sharing experiences of oppression the goal is to develop a political awareness, at the same time it cannot be denied that these aspects and

their effects might be present. Still, there is no debate on designing tools for resistance, action, and organizing, in the feminist activist sense (Sowards and Renegar 2004).

Based on my interviews and fieldwork experience, I nevertheless find that in practice, women's circles can be viewed as sites of dissent. Organizers and participants engage in 'resisting' patriarchy, by sharing, exchanging, and thereby developing alternative embodied 'woman-centred' knowledge and experiences. This takes place in a safe, trusting, and non-judgmental setting, for which it is held a forum is lacking in their personal and public lives. Women's circles allow individual women to develop self-awareness and practice 'radical' self-care, yet also in being nourished, nurtured, and supported by others. The primary goal is to cultivate one's strengths and resilience rather than raise awareness of one's presumed oppression. Nonetheless, they most certainly aim to empower women, in a holistic and collective sense, thereby exceeding some of the more individual-focused and often anonymous 'consumption' that is familiar in the MBS sphere. Rather than a return to the past, my interviewees saw circling as an essential and new phase in the unfinished revolution of women's emancipation. Opposed to certain radical and liberal feminist critiques of patriarchy, this also implied a solidarity with men, toward a shared future, not through 'fighting to prove your equality with men', but by stepping into one's own feminine power. Making a connection to one's 'feminine self', at the individual level and in connection with other women, is seen as the affirmative key to personal but ultimately, also, societal change.

4. Conclusions: The Personal Is Political? Circles as Sites of Dissent and the Rise of the Feminine

Although some of the women's circles in this study contain what can be identified as spiritual elements, I have shown that as a phenomenon they can generally be referred to as part of 'subjective wellbeing culture' that can be characterized as more post-secular than strictly religious, spiritual, or secular. Post-secular femininities in liberal societies, if not in their full rejection then certainly in their playfulness with dualisms such as masculine/feminine, religion/secular, or mind/spirit versus body/material, and most certainly in their dissent vis-à-vis the public sphere and its relegation of the body, the sexual and cyclical, of care and affect to the private sphere, seem to resonate with both older and more recent traditions in feminist thought. While women's circle organizers and practitioners usually do not self-identify as feminist activists, analytically speaking, circles contain features that can be viewed as kind of woman-centred feminism, yet divert from more radical or cultural feminist tenets. Female embodiment and femininity serve as a politics of location, as a starting point from which to question, experience, and explore in a more creative sense rather than a counterculture based on a fixed sense of identity and gender essentialism. This form of women's agency and subjectivity tends towards a more affirmative tradition underlining the open-ended potential of sexual difference (Braidotti 2011).

While previous empirical research on women's involvement in new spiritualities has revealed some of the agentic aspects of re-valuing the feminine, it has also been highly critical, particularly when it comes to the broader realm of wellbeing culture with a neo-liberal, consumerist, individualist, and postfeminist slant, and its potentially 'false' sense of empowerment and liberation. On the basis of my empirical study, I nevertheless maintain that the increasingly popular phenomenon of women's circles and the emerging 'new feminine' contains feminist potential. I have shown how there is a move beyond mere introspection and personal empowerment, by forwarding the idea of 'women's power' as emerging in and from collective agency, through forging connections, solidarity, and sisterhood with other women. Furthermore, as expressed in the quote by activist and circle organizer Jean Bolen introducing this paper (Bolen 2013), circle organizers, including my interviewees, believe that circles will lead to a multiplier effect. Almost in a prophetic sense, they hold that the more women who participate and the more circles there are, a revolution towards a more feminine world to the benefit of everyone, —'the rise of the feminine'—will take place. More than a prophecy, my research also shows that civil engagement is effectively taking place, as many interviewees were involved in developing networks (local, national, and transnationally) and organizing larger events such as women's festivals.

Some were also introducing the circle method and techniques for ‘developing your feminine power’ into the workplace and public sphere, such as in professional coaching, for learning leadership skills, in NGO’s and as service-providing consultants at companies, business events, and governmental equality policy programs.

Neither the dupes of a false consciousness, nor as public activists from an exclusive sense of oppositional consciousness, I find that circles potentially provide women, individually and collectively, agency through a more embodied ‘holistic’ means of consciousness-raising with both affirmative and oppositional elements vis-à-vis secular society and its dominant (neo-) liberal gender ideology. Their emergence and the increasing attraction for women from diverse backgrounds transnationally to new forms of spirituality and subjective well-being requires more attention and analysis in the study of gender, religion, and society, and the fields of religious studies and gender studies more generally than has hereto been received. For from the side of secular feminists, spirituality has often been rendered invisible and disassociated from issues of social transformation, as earlier claimed by Leela Fernandes (2003, p. 9): ‘At best, feminist theorists and organizations tend to relegate spirituality to the local “cultural” idioms of grassroots women (usually in “other” places and “other” women), acknowledging it in the name of an uneasy cultural relativist tendency of “respecting cultural difference”’. I concur that even in the wake of the ‘post-secular turn in feminism’ in today’s highly diversified and globalized societies, the focus still remains largely confined to the agency of ‘non-secular’ women within institutionalized religious traditions. In research that is increasingly (self-) critical of liberal-secularism, there remains a problematic tendency to ‘displace’ the agentic potential of religion/spirituality to those fields of tradition and thought that are inadvertently reproduced as ‘other’ to the Western modern secular self—even if the same work may be intent upon deconstructing that very secular-modern versus religious-traditional binary. There is nonetheless a growing curiosity from the side of secular feminism for the neglected, yet critical, and even political potential of spirituality (Cornell and Seely 2016; Braidotti 2008). This paper answers to that call with empirical research on a new kind spirituality/wellbeing practiced by (pre-dominantly, but not exclusively) white middle-class women in the West, and argues it exemplifies a form of post-secular women’s agency and emerging feminist political consciousness.

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